

FEMINISM:

The Anarchist Impulse Comes Alive



By Helene Ellenbogen

"It is a commentary. . . on how little theories fight inhibitions. Here you are an anarchist, firmly believing in the utmost freedom of the individual, and yet you persist in glorifying women as the cook and breeder of large families. Do you not see the inconsistency of your claims? But the inhibitions and traditions of the male are too deep set. I am afraid they will continue long after anarchism has been established. . ." (Emma Goldman to Max Nettlau)

The second wave of American feminism was born in the late sixties in the midst of a generation of women who had gotten their first political experience in the new left. That experience had left many of them with the acute sense that the economic and political realm were not sufficient for a revolution; that any real revolution would have to be a social one which included the very way human relationships were structured and experienced.

Of course the concept of social revolution was not new; social revolution was the term used by anarchists since the middle of the nineteenth century. Nor was the concept of the personal as political and the political as personal a new one. Anarchists, particularly

anarchist women had struggled for that ideal for a century. It is no accident that Louise Michel fought against the men in the Paris Commune who would not allow prostitutes to act as nurses for the wounded soldiers or that Emma Goldman was as feared by her opponents for her advocacy of free love and birth control as she was for her views on the State.

The Second Wave

In the early feminist movement the split between the radical or revolutionary feminists and the liberals was quickly apparent. But the split among the radical feminists also surfaced quickly. As early as 1969 the Manifesto of the Women's Majority Union in Seattle, known as Lilith's Manifesto, declared: "This revolution has got to go for broke: power to no one, and to every one: to each the power over his/her own life, and no others." That same year, the Women's Caucus in YIP declared in a somewhat more Dadaist style, "the Women's Liberation Caucus within the Youth International Party, being through a rigorous analysis of the thoughts of Mao, Susan B. Anthony, Che, Lenin, and Groucho, considers itself bound by the historic necessity of becoming the vanguard party of the progressive women's revolution because we fly higher."

A year earlier WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) covens had sprung up all over North America proclaiming open warfare on dehumanizing institutions from the United Fruit Company to sexist sons. "Whatever is repressive, solely male-oriented, greedy, puritanical, authoritarian—those are your targets." A common style united the covens and made them known in the broader women's community—they were implacable, theatrical and humorous in the way in which they pursued their activism. Each coven was autonomous, though many were in close communication with each other, and all of them were "un-hierarchical to the point of anarchy." During this period too, *Siren*, an anarchist feminist journal, the first of its kind, was published in Chicago.

We Won't Be Fooled Again

Somewhat later, the split between the radical feminists, conscious anarchists and the more authoritarian socialist feminists became clearly articulated in the discussion over Joreen's "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" and the anarchist reply by Cathy Levine, "The Tyranny of Tyranny." The small group structure which characterized the feminist movement in the Consciousness Raising group stage, now came to be scrutinized. Anarchist women opposed the push toward greater centralization, hierarchical structures and abstracted political lines.

The argument over structure went much deeper than the question of how women's groups should be organized. What it ultimately questioned was the nature of the revolution in which women would be involved. ". . . the consciousness raising phase of the movement is not over. Consciousness raising is a vital process which must go on. . . to and through the revolutionary liberation. . . Consciousness raising as a strategy for revolution must involve helping women translate their personal dissatisfaction into class-consciousness and making organized women accessible to all women." (C. Levine)

Much of the discussion began to focus on the historic differences between Marxism-Leninism and Anarchism. Furthermore, the opposing views on the relationship between the psychological roots of oppression, political activism and organization divided the two camps from each other. The anarchist women along with many of their radical feminist sisters further developed the analysis Emma Goldman had expressed many years earlier—that "revolution must essentially be a process of reconstruction. . . that the only purpose of revolution must be transformation." For Goldman as well as for the contemporary anti-authoritarians, this

involved personal relationships with each other, to one's own body and mind, as well as to the larger social and political institutions.

In part, the result of the focus on the personal as political allowed women to spend time pursuing their own creativity without feeling they were letting down "the movement." Poetry, art, theater, dance, all became political forms of expression through personal creativity. The new society had begun taking form in the belly of the old. "I cannot imagine a free society without beauty, for of what use liberty, if not to strive for beauty? . . . beauty of personality, human relationship, and the finer things in nature or in life." (Goldman). Louise Michel articulated the same feeling somewhat differently when she said, "I am then an anarchist because only anarchy means the happiness of humanity."

The focus on the personal as political has always been an element of anarchism. However, among anarchist men the practice has never been realized in any meaningful way. Much of Goldman's and Berkman's arguments with each other focused on the issue of emphasis on the personal; much of the alienation of anarchy-feminists from male anarchists reiterates that theme. "Nor should we delude ourselves about consideration of women's issues in the past of the anarchist movement. Feminist priorities were no more positively perceived by anarchist men than by any others in over-all male socialist circles. . . It is patently untrue that male anarchists usually led lives compatible in practice with the theories, and implications of theories which they originated." (Leighton)

On The Road

The early seventies marked the period of conscious articulation of anarchist feminism. A manifesto written by a group of women in Chicago committed itself to the destruction of "all vestiges of the male-dominated power structure, the State itself—with its whole ancient and dismal apparatus of jails, armies and armed robbery (taxation); with all its murder; with all of its grotesque and repressive legislation and military attempts. . . to interfere with people's private lives and freely-chosen cooperative ventures."

Another manifesto written by Black Mari and Red Rosia in Cambridge stated, "As true anarchists and as true feminists, we say dan to dream the impossible and never settle for less than total translation of the impossible into reality."

The nascent anarchism of many radical feminists had become conscious, and women felt that this was an important step in the articulation of their politics. "Having perceived that there are 'natural' anarchistic tendencies in the women's movement, an anarchy-feminist is one who intellectually identifies with major aspects of the intellectual tradition of anarchist radicalism. I anarchism itself were more well-known as radical tradition, the term 'anarchy-feminist' would be self evident. . . one who has chosen to utilize a particular intellectual analytic method to aid in the development of feminist theory and strategy." (Peggy Kornegger)

Anarchist feminism does not have developed body of theory. Yet it has become increasingly more clear to feminists that th

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Anarcha-feminists of the past (from top, clockwise): Louise Michel, 1830-1905, veteran of the Paris Commune; Voltairine de Cleyre, 1866-1912, poet and propagandist; Emma Goldman, 1869-1940, agitator for the Social Revolution; Marie-Louise Berneri, 1918-49, anti-fascist militant; and Lucy Parsons, 1853-1942, a founder of the Wobblies.

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theories of liberation developing out of feminism create a vital link to the anti-authoritarian theories of anarchism. In the article "Anarchism: The Feminist Connection" Kornegger states:

"Living within and being conditioned by an authoritarian society often prevents us from making that all-important connection between feminism and anarchism. When we say we are fighting the patriarchy, it isn't always clear to all of us that that means fighting *all* hierarchy, *all* leadership, *all* government, and the very idea of authority itself. Our impulses toward collective work and small leaderless groups have been anarchistic, but in most cases we haven't called them by that name. And that is important, because an understanding of feminism as anarchism could springboard women out of reformism and stopgap measures into a revolutionary confrontation with the basic nature of authoritarian politics."

What Is Being Done

Anarchist feminists define themselves in various ways. Some are lesbians, some are heterosexual; some work with women only, others work in mixed groups; some focus on issues relating most directly to women, others focus on issues such as nuclear power. All see the need and the desirability of a variety of groupings which allow for the broadest possible expression of political activity in personally satisfying groups. The breadth and variety of work in which different women are involved is astounding.

Periodically, a newsletter called **Anarcha-feminist Notes** is published by a collective who has the energy to do it. As of this printing the mailing address is: c/o Karen Johnson, 1821 8th St., Des Moines, Iowa. The location for publication changes with each issue. The newsletter acts primarily as a communications network among women.

The last issue of **Anarcha-feminist Notes** was published by Tiamat, a study-action group in Ithaca, New York. Much of their political activity focuses on issues which involve people who are not anarchists. Some of Tiamat's activities are done as a group, others by individuals in it. The women describe themselves thus: "We live in Ithaca as lesbians or bisexuals, as straight couples, with children, alone, in cooperative houses, as celibates; we all work hard, some in regular jobs..."

Like Tiamat, anarcha-feminist study groups are springing up everywhere. In the last three months, two such groups have developed in Seattle and others in Montreal and Vancouver. These groups have formed partly as a result of disillusionment with women's groups who implicitly assume a definition of socialism which excludes anarchism and which is hierarchical in nature. Such study groups are often a focus not only for collectively expanding theoretical knowledge, but for other political activity of various members into a coherent whole. The Ithaca group sums it up, "At the same time as our group studies and celebrates we are each involved individually and sometimes collectively in different actions around local and national issues." These range from the local food coop, to lesbian rights to ecology struggles.

In a similar vein, at a recent convention of the War Resisters League, a large number of women attended a workshop on anarcha-feminism, some because they defined their politics as anarchist and feminist, others because they wanted to learn about a hybrid which sounded appealing.

Anarchists and anarcha-feminists are involved in food coops and alternative health clinics across North America. One of the founders of a shelter for battered women in Cambridge is an anarchist and describes the shelter as being essentially anarchistic in its organizational structure. In Seattle and Boston, health clinics and women's clinics which have led the fight against government access to client files through funding, are run as collectives and include a number of anarcha-feminists. Both the collective process and the resistance to cooptation by the State, as well as the clear understanding



that any legitimization given to the police arm of the State simply strengthens its ability to dominate, comes from a perspective defiant of authority and ready to end it.

Although many of the collectives in which anarcha-feminists work do not define themselves as anarchist, it is clear that their structures and philosophy are anarchistic. An example is the shelter for battered women in Cambridge. Women there are not encouraged to call the police or deal with the abusive males through the courts (a common practice in similar shelters). Rather, a philosophy of self-help and self-determination for the women who come to the shelter is fostered.

Much of the interest in anarchism for the anarcha-feminist mentioned above stems from her disillusion with other elements of the left. "I'm not gonna fight for any revolution that's going to leave me as oppressed and manipulated as I am now." Her sentiments are shared by many others as is her priority for working with women whose oppression she shares directly.

Peggy Kornegger, part of the **Second Wave** collective, describes her evolution toward anarchism in a similar manner. "To many leftists the revolution was either sacrificial or so male authoritarian that I couldn't relate to it. We'll have beauty after the revolution, but right now get out and sell those pamphlets." The prospect was not sufficiently inviting. "The revolution needs to combine the spiritual, the poetic, the political, the

sexual—the past, present and future simultaneously. The means have to also be the ends." Peggy stressed that the revolution should not be thought of as an immediate accomplishment in which someone is taken out of power and replaced with someone else. She sees the vision of revolution as an ongoing process which we begin to live in the present.

Second Wave, like the shelter for battered women, operates as a non-hierarchical collective. The politics of the magazine are not uniformly anarchistic. However, like the shelter, the process of the magazine reflects what Peggy has described as unconscious anarchism.

Come! Unity Press in New York, which started as an anarchist and feminist collective has had a great effect on the process of many feminist groups in the East. The press operates as a community service; anyone can print their material. The people at the press are willing to teach anyone to use the equipment. This has led to a natural selection process which excludes groups unwilling to do the manual labor on their own projects.

The economic position **Come! Unity** has held since its start, is its most important feature. The press operates on a basis of pay more if you can, less if you can't. It demands that everything printed on its presses be distributed with this philosophy. As a result, the press has serious financial problems. Nonetheless, they have managed to operate sometimes as a collective, sometimes with

just one person for over five years. "If we want an anarchist future, we really need to have an anarchist response to the present—an inspiring, hopeful, vision. It makes sense—if you thought about how you really want to live, it has to be anarchism."

A great deal of anarcha-feminist work revolves around communication. In Seattle several of the women working on a women's prison newsletter, **Through the Looking Glass**, are anarcha-feminists. In Baltimore, a small group of anarchists and anarcha-feminists operate an anarchist school. The school (a kind of free university) offers a variety of courses: creative writing for children, Wilhelm Reich, movement structural skills, how to form a coop and bread baking. They also offer courses in political theory, feminism and have open forums on anarchism.

An overlapping group works as the Great Atlantic Radio Conspiracy which produces tapes on various political and social topics. Yet another overlapping group prints and writes pamphlets under the name Research Group One. (Number 26 in their series is Carol Ehrlich's **Socialism Anarchism and Feminism**). In Rochester, New York, Mutualist Books, a small publisher operates on a collective basis and includes anarchist feminism in its perspective. A number of anarchist publications including **The Open Road** and **The Fifth Estate** in Detroit include women who are clearly anarchists and feminists. Two newspapers with strong anarcha-feminist focus have also recently begun publication, **Soil of Liberty** in Minneapolis and **Feminist Communications** in San Diego.

Book stores, like small presses, seem to involve large numbers of anarcha-feminists. In many cases the store is seen as a center for activity in the community and as a communications voice.

Community organizing efforts, particularly around housing, is another area of anarcha-feminist involvement. The basic unit of a neighborhood fits easily into the anarchist concept of small groups and self-determination. This is particularly significant in large east coast cities, where the fight for decent housing is escalating rapidly as arson by the landlords wipes out large numbers of low cost buildings. In Montreal, New York and Boston this seems to be a new focus. Here again, anarcha-feminists work in groups of both men and women with extremely varied politics. Where their influence is most evident is in the new tendency to focus housing organization away from legislative and judicial reform and into self-help groups.

The focus on organization on a local level and the emphasis on the relationship of the personal as political has raised the question of method (tactics, if you like military jargon) among anarcha-feminists. Some are avowedly non-violent and see the avoidance of all bloodshed as central to the struggle for freedom. Others see armed struggle as an inevitable necessity though they reject much of the militarism which has traditionally characterized this kind of struggle in Europe and North America. In neither case is there debate over the destruction of property as an appropriate means.

The question of violence is central to anarcha-feminists in either camp because violence has been used so directly as a way to dominate women. The problem is one of the relationship between the means and the end: will the use of violence now give a legacy of violence to the world we are fighting to create; and how much of the violence which has characterized the old revolutions is necessary in the new ones? Emma Goldman sums up the dilemma in a letter:

"I still believe that great social changes have not and cannot take place without some clash. After all, revolutions are nothing else but the breaking point of accumulated evolutionary forces. Such a breaking point is inherent in nature and expresses itself through violent storms. Equally so are the forces inherent in life. Every change from the old to something new creates violent upheavals on our being. So too, such upheavals take place in the social and economic life of the world. But I have come to the conclusion that the amount of violence in any revolution will depend entirely upon the amount of preparation on the part of the conflicting forces—the amount of *inner* preparation."

(For copies of the above-mentioned articles contact Revolving Women, PO Box 46571, Sta. G, Vancouver, B.C.)